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ABSTRACT

In 1979, the Louisiana State University (Baton Rouge) began the Recruitment into Engineering of High Ability Minority Students program (REHAMS). The purpose of the program was to give students a head start in their college courses while providing them with an opportunity for counseling and tutoring. To balance the curriculum's scientific emphasis and lessen pressure on students surviving in a predominantly white institution, a writing course based on tagmemic rhetoric was incorporated into the curriculum. Using linguistic and anthropological observations of how people of various cultures come to understand the world and overcome differences in their perceptions of that world, the course required students to acknowledge their problematic situations in three prewriting actions. First, students chose paper topics on problematic situations they faced. Second, students stated the problem they planned to explore in their paper. Third, students used tagmemics in considering their problems from the perspective of particle, wave, and field. All three actions helped students to think and write comprehensively but precisely about things that bothered them such as their alienation from the mainstream of students and faculty and possible scholastic troubles as a result of that alienation. (HOD)

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ADAPTING TAGMEMIC THEORY FOR EARLY ENTRY BLACK ENGINEERING STUDENTS AT A SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY

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Adapting Tagmemic Theory for Early Entry Black Engineering STudents at a Southern University

Baton Rouge, Louisiana sits on the east bank of the Mississippi River. Upstream and downstream Louisiana's capitol city is edged in by oil refineries and chemical plants like Dow, Exxon, Kaiser, Ethyl, Allied and Texaco. The petro-chemical industries dominate both the landscape of southern Louisiana and its economy. As Russell Long, Louisiana's senior senator, says, "What's good for oil is good for Louisiana." The relationship between the state and its major industry is reciprocal. That means that the state institutions of higher education attempt to meet industry's needs for highly trained technical personnel. Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge boasts the largest programs in the state in business and engineering. In addition to the usual state monies which the LSU colleges of business and engineering receive, they receive special grants from the petro-chemical industries as well.

Recently, the fact that less than 5% of the engineers in the United States come from minority groups caused Exxon to fund a program at LSU to recruit minority students into engineering fields. The program is called REHAMS, an acronym for Recruitment into Engineering of High Ability Minority Students. The purpose of Rehams is to give students a headstart in their college courses while providing them with counseling and tutoring if they need or want either.

The Rehams program began in 1979. During that summer ten black students with ACT scores that averaged around 25 matriculated at LSU. The average GPA at the end of that summer was something less than 1.0 on a 4 point scale. Administrators were distraught. How could so many bright students bomb their courses so completely?

That was the question put to me by the Assistant to the Dean of the College of Engineering. She was hoping that my five years of teaching at Southern University, the largest black university in the country, would help me provide answers she didn't have. As I quizzed her about REHAMS, a recurring theme ran through her remarks; students had seemed unable to cope with the situation at LSU. As she talked, I remembered the "invisibility" of Ralph Ellison's protagonist in *The Invisible Man*. I remembered the chilling narratives in *Black Rage*, a collection of stories about well established black executives in large corporations who "broke" under the

pressures of surviving in predominately white institutions. I also remembered the words of some of my students at Southern who had transferred there from LSU. LSU had been too big, too white, they had told me; they felt out of place. Finally, I reflected on my own experience as a white teaching in a large black institution--I had lived the minority experience as well. I knew the psychological discomfort of being a minority in an institution where the majority makes all the rules. And I was a mature adult. How much more intense that feeling would be in a freshman who knew he was expected to live up to his potential, even while taking a demanding scientific curriculum.

I passed all this onto the Assistant Dean and suggested that a writing course be included in the Rehams curriculum to balance the scientific emphasis. It would be a place where the students could take stock of themselves as individuals. I mentioned a few activities my beginning writing classes often did—journal keeping and writing personal/expressive papers at the beginning of the course, for example. I also mentioned the possibility of having students read works by black writers like Claude Brown, Martin Luther King, Arna Bontemps and others. Finally, I told her about tagmemic rhetoric.

Tagmemic rhetoric seemed made to order for the affective and cognitive needs of Rehams students. It was based on linguistic and anthropological observations of how people of various cultures come to understand the world and how they overcome differences in their perceptions of that world. It required students to acknowledge the existence of problematic situations, that is, conflicts within their images of the world.(Young, Becker and Pike, 1970, p. 71) For Rehams students that would mean dealing openly with the problems I expected them to face while they were attending LSU--alienation from the mainstream of students and faculty and possible scholastic troubles as a result of that alienation. It seemed logical that using tagmemic rhetoric in the composition course might relieve some of the pressure on students and thereby improve the likelihood of their success at LSU.

Tagmemic rhetoric promised cognitive riches, also, in the three pre-writing actions it proposes for students writing papers. First, paper subjects come from problematic situations that students face. Second, once students determine problematic situations, they state the problems they plan to explore in their papers. Although this action sounds similar to the narrowing of a subject practiced in more traditional courses, it has the greater advantage of requiring students to focus immediately on the tensions of the situation and to postulate in a terse document

possible hypotheses for resolution. Third, once the problem statement has been written, tagmemics presents students with a unique method for considering their problems and/or their hypotheses, from the different but complementary perspectives of particle, wave and field. All three actions promised to goad students into thinking and writing comprehensively but precisely about things that bothered them, and because tagmemics had something of the rigor of science, I thought would appeal to these would-be scientists.

When Exxon decided to refund Rehams in 1980, the College of Engineering asked me to design a tagmemics composition course for it. I taught the course that summer and then again during the summer of 1982 and then again during the summer of 1982. I emphasized problematic situations throughout the seven week term, and I added problem statement and the tagmemic grid during the last half of the course. Today, I will talk about how I applied the concept of problematic situation in the course. I choose to discuss this aspect for three reasons. First, one of the biggest differences between tagmemics courses and other courses is in the kind of subjects they propose that students to write about. Second, all the specifically tagmemic activities build on the problematic situation. Finally, my determination of particular problematic situations as the basis for the course represents the greatest difference between a tagmemics course for the black students in this situation as opposed to a tagmemics course for other students.

Let us start at the beginning. During the first week, I determined that I would force students' awareness of the problematic situations I saw them facing at LSU in the hopes that early articulation would coax resolution. Toward that end I required much work early: one hundred pages of *Manchild in the Promised Land* each night, to be precise. I locked in the reading discipline by scheduling a test on *Manchild*, without prior discussion of it, for the beginning of the second week. Second, I made students consider the inevitability of grades. I showed them the "D's" and "F's" of the 1979 REHAMS students. Immediately afterwards they freewrote on "Why Am I Really Here?" I was hoping that students would see, early on, the consequences of bad decisions and the quality of committment necessary to succeed at LSU. I went to extremes with this lesson because I wanted students to remember throughout the summer the feelings they had had when they saw their predecessors' bad grades. I thought then, and I think now, that it was crucial that the Rehams students be conscious that they would decide to steer their own lives or else those lives would be steered for them by others. My sole intent that first week was to establish

personally engaging problematic situations as the basis for the thinking, reading and writing that would follow.

The first reading assignment was Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land*, an autobiography of a young black's struggle to rise above the violence in the drug-infested streets of Harlem in the 50's. The theme of this autobiography made it an appropriate choice. Claude, alone, of all his teenage friends escaped death or drug addiction, and he did so only because he made a conscious decision to leave his friends when the temptation to stay with them was very great. He refused to just "hang out" and be one of the gang. I thought Brown's decision compared to one that an earnest freshman, especially one aspiring to be an engineer, must make in order to succeed in college.

The importance of decision-making and committment to goals that Brown exhibited was one lesson I wanted students to learn from him, but it wasn't something I wanted to belabor. Provoking students into thinking about Brown's situation was enough. Consequently, I shifted the focus from Brown's situation in *Manchild* to *Manchild* as a good piece of expressive writing. We focussed on its rhetorical excellencies, and faults, and I asked students to think of it as a model for their first major paper. Like Brown, students were to write about a place which had caused a problematic situation for them, focusing on the tensions the place had caused and their resolution of those tensions. This assignment was a slightly modified version of the first assignment in Janice Lauer et al's textbook, *Four Worlds of Writing*, much of which is based on tagmemic rhetoric. In choosing that assignment I was putting my students into a position similar to Brown's with Harlem. I reinforced that position and gave students yet another model by assigning "Why I Returned," by Arna Bontemps. In that essay Bontemps explains why, after a twenty year odyssey around the United States, to points west, north and east, he decided to return to the South to live.

Good papers came from this assignment. One student wrote about her high school before and after racial confrontations among students and parents, another about the security office in Howard's Department Store, where he was taken after he was caught shoplifting. Another student wrote about moving from her old neighborhood when the Louisiana Department of Highways appropriated the land where her home stood. Here are the last two sentences of her conclusion:

"It still seems strange to see an interstate standing where my

neighborhood once stood. I know that the world must change with the times, but I wonder why it had to start by taking my home." (Clark, p. 14)

Many of the papers from this assignment had similarly provocative insights, though the papers were, as usual, more flawed than I would have hoped. The most thoughtful paper of the group came from a student who had lived in Augsberg, Germany, while his father was stationed there. I'll read you one of his paragraphs.

"I call my seventh through ninth grades my 'Dark Ages' because of their similarities to the medieval period of the same name. Just like then, I went through a period of regression, only mine was brought about by my isolation from the group which I identified with most [the blacks in his junior high class]. Because of this lag in development, even now I am behind my peers in terms of social maturity. Just three years ago, I had my first real girlfriend. In Claude Browns [sic] words, 'I was late coming out of the house.'" (Hardy p.)

In addition to reading and writing assignments, I used outside speakers to stimulate thought about other problematic situations. The Assistants to the Vice Chancellors for Academic Affairs at both LSU and Southern spoke to Rehams students on their areas of expertise--the Harlem Renaissance and African cultures, respectively. I scheduled these talks when the class was discussing the different perspectives of the "insiders" and "outsiders" in cultures, terms that Young, Becker and Pike, the tagmemic theorists, use in Chapter 3 of *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change*, the most complete tagmemic textbook available. The point of that chapter is that the writer must choose the details of his experience and knowledge which are relevant to his audience if he expects to be understood by that audience. The different attitudes between American blacks and coastal east African blacks, for example, would have to be understood if the common roots between the two cultures were to overcome their differences. The struggles of black writers to gain white attention in the 1920's involved a more subtle problematic situation which the Renaissance artists resolved through their art. They used Western artistic forms, the sonnet, for example, to house outcries about racial injustice. Claude McKay's "If We Must Die" and Countee Cullen's "Yet Do I Marvel" are two examples of Harlem Renaissance writers perceiving problematic situations and resolving them through means credible to the Western cultural world. Because the messages were couched

in the sonnet form which white audiences had revered for hundreds of years, the audience listened to the messages. Harlem Renaissance writers had acted upon the advice Young, Becker and Pike were later to give in *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change*: Find the details that allow an outsider to act like an insider and your message may be understood.

The last half of the course focused on this insider/outsider relationship which I brought to bear through assignments for informative and persuasive papers that, once again, came out of problematic situations. I taught problem statement and the tagmemic grid to help students think of the relevant details their audiences needed, and students hypothesized audiences to receive their messages. Some persuasive paper topics were a long letter to a Louisiana legislator asking him to propose a jobs bill, an editorial decrying the abuses of braodcast evangelists, and a technical report which presented a plan for increasing both voter registration and voting in Alexandria, La. THe rest of the papers in this set exhibited the same diversity of subject and approach apparent in these three. What was common among them was their basis in personal yet public problems and their resolution via the written word. Most reflected comprehensiveness and precision, the values of the tagmemic pre-writing activities students had been learning.

It's not easy to evaluate the Rehams composition course. On the one hand I'm encouraged by the 2.9 and 2.2 GPA's students maintained the summers I taught this course. On the other hand, I know that the higher GPA is not necessarily the result of my tagmemics course. There were simply too many variables to be able to say that. I do know, however, that the subjective reports I received from students and administrators credit the course with providing the human element necessary to anticipate and counter the problems black students have had on the LSU campus. One 1980 student, for example, who returned in 1982 as a counselor for the program, told me that she had enjoyed reading the work of black writers--something she had not done formally before or since the Rehams course--and that she still used the pre-writing activities she had learned in 1980. Those activities had made her think more precisely, she said.

What these subjective reports tell me is that tagmemic rhetoric worked in this situation. Far from being rigid and distant and unteachable--assertions I have heard made about tagmemics--I found the approach amenable to my delicate situation as a white teacher of black students at a Southern university. Furthermore, it made Rehams students aware of problematic situations in their personal, academic and

public worlds, and it provided them with systematic tools for probing the dissonances they found there. Tagmemic rhetoric may be a new and different approach to the old, old task of teaching writing, but its center is right where it should be--in the individual writer as perceiver and solver of problems.